# Libertarianism and Tech Utopia

or: What Happens When No One Can Work?

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Initially, this started as a sort of exercise to organise my thoughts surrounding this topic. As such it was extremely messy with no clear structure and no clear claim. I was just letting the words take me where they would. Once I got a bit into it I realised that I had three main parts: first, an analysis of the common claim that a friendly, aligned[1] Artificial Superintelligence will make it so that goods and services will never be scarce for anyone ever again. Second, an analysis of what to do when ASI is able to do every human's job better than they can (whether or not the first claim of unlimited resources is true!) As such, I've re-worked it to reflect those two groupings. If you are already convinced ASI means no more scarcity (or that scarcity is a fact of our life here in this universe no matter the advancements made), by all means skip to Part II. If you're unsure and would like to add some structure to your thoughts, may I suggest you start by considering:

## PART I: OKAY BUT LIKE, WHAT EVEN IS SCARCITY, MAAAAAN?

And why does it even matter to know what scarcity is and looks like? This matters because many of the underlying arguments for capitalism are due to scarcity. For instance, take this famous quote from Thomas Sowell: "Prices are important not because money is considered paramount but because prices are a fast and effective conveyor of information through a vast society in which fragmented knowledge must be coordinated." That's in reference to the free market solution to the knowledge problem: how can you have efficient allocation of scarce goods and services. That sentence contains a few assumptions: namely that goods and services **are in fact scarce** and that they must be **efficiently** allocated.

Throughout history, those assumptions have always held true. Even in our relatively decadent society today we see scarcity, lack of resources. As long as that condition holds, the second follows naturally. It is good to want to have the most efficient allocation if our resources are not unlimited. Full stop. Free market capitalism is the best way to do that, again full stop. If you aren't convinced by that, this piece likely isn't for you. For anyone in that sceptical camp, I recommend Freedom over Fear if you're into politics and Out of Frame if you're into movies/TV shows.

As for future history, displaying ASI in media as beneficial is largely eschewed in favour of terminator-esque ASI domination. Across the board, however, ideas around Artificial General Intelligence and Artificial Super Intelligence are explored in a variety of forms. There's AGI that stays AGI, AGI that progresses to ASI, good AGI, bad AGI, good ASI, bad ASI, and everything in between. Usually in these, when ASI doesn't implement sweeping changes it is because it is limited in some capacity. In the worlds where ASI is unlimited and turns out to be friendly, the general assumption made is that 100% of people's needs will be taken care of – along with quite a few of their wants to boot.

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[1] That's an important point to note: for the entirety of this work, the assumption will be made that the ASI is aligned and will generally listen to us if we make reasonable requests. I don't do the hard work of prognosticating on whether or not ASI will be aligned or not; I'll leave that to the fine, terminally-online folks over at LessWrong.

See WALL-E as an excellent example of this. The world we see in WALL-E (or at least the world within the Axiom) is characterized by robots taking care of people's wants and needs[2]. When someone wants a massage, a robot does it. When there's a spill or otherwise a contaminant, a robot cleans it. When someone needs food, robots prepare it, a robot serves it, and then a robot takes away the trash. When someone wants a new haircut, a robot gives it. Rather than being taught by humans, children in nurseries are taught by robots. I could go on, but I believe the point is made. Every job (except, it usually appears, the captain's) is done by a robot.

There are very convincing rebuttals to the idea that advanced technology will lead to a world of post-scarcity due to AI automating all of the jobs. Most of these don't talk about artificial intelligence, but of those that do, they only focus narrowly (pun intended) on narrow AI. For instance, take this quote from Job Loss Due To AI — How Bad Is It Going To Be?:

> *"All references to AI below will mean this "weak" or "narrow" variety. In this article we do not consider "strong" or "generalized" AI, a type of AI that is theoretically capable of (super)human-level intelligence across a broad range of skills. Most AI researchers believe that strong AI is unlikely to materialize in the near future, and even weak AI is likely to have outsized impacts on jobs and the economy."*

Or this quote from Will robots and AI cause mass unemployment? Not necessarily, but they do bring other threats:

> *"First off, artificial intelligence, 3D printers and other innovations are generally designed to excel at a very specific set of tasks. They will rarely be able to substitute an entire occupation, which, in most cases, requires much more versatility and adaptability."*

This focus on narrow AI, not AGI or ASI, seems like a wild oversight based on the fact that weak AGI is expected in about 4 years, with strong AGI expected in 14 years, and ASI expected in less than that. ASI will be able to out-compete every human at every job ever, assuming extra restrictions aren't placed on the ASI[3]. Some might be sceptical of that claim. They might say "no matter how 'smart' it is, ASI will never truly *understand* what it is doing well enough to, say, invent a new lightbulb, or do the R&D process to create a new gadget, or truly be *creative*." To which I say: when was the last time you won a chess match against your laptop? Do you think your laptop truly *understands* chess? Do you think AlphaGo is being *creative* when it plays a move that forces the top Go player in the world to walk out of the room for 15 minutes, only to come back and lose 4-1? No, of course not. Lee Sedol retired from playing Go not because he believes his opponent understands or creates new strategies, but rather just because he noted there is one more domain which we now have enough train and compute power to make it so humans need not apply.

Lest you be tempted to think "sure sure mate, but that's just another silly game. AI has been beating people one game at a time for a while," I'll remind you that the same agent used for Go can also play chess and shogi. Additionally, the technique used to do this also generalizes to learning how to predict the structure of folded proteins. A different (singular!) model, Gato, can do all of "play Atari, caption images, chat, stack blocks with a real robot arm and much more." Not to mention the incredible ChatGPT which can write code, outline essays, chat about who is the best basketball player, teach Japanese, give instructions for updating the linux kernel in Portuguese, write rap battles, and much much more.

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[2] Some may say "But the world of WALL-E is run by Buy n Large, a capitalist company focused only on profits!" To which I would say, please see two quotes from the Captain of the Axiom: quote 1 and quote 2

[3] Extra restrictions like "must be done by a humanoid robot" or even "must be done by a human"

Now, all of these tasks AI is capable of that I've mentioned so far have been largely intellectual. What's to say ASI will be able to automate physical jobs? Again, let me point you to WALL-E. In that movie, specialist robots take care of specialist tasks. An ASI could most certainly design and manufacture similar specialist robots to complete just about any task that needs to be done.

The last refuge of contention those who believe ASI won't take *all* the jobs have to cling to is the idea of creative destruction. This is often discussed in the context of old businesses dying off in favour of new, more productive, more efficient ones (when was the last time you saw a Blockbuster? And how many people do you know who don't have Netflix?), but it can also be talked about in terms of jobs. In a recent episode of Build for Tomorrow, host Jason Feifer and guest David Autor talk about the "lump of labour fallacy," the idea that there is a fixed amount of work or labour to do in an economy and any time some of that work is automated, fewer people can work. This is, of course, largely false and the podcast episode does a good job of describing why.

However, I believe this pattern will not hold. The reason why is simple: in the past it was at least *possible* to envision a new role that humans could do better than their automaton counterparts. Farming is being more mechanized by machines? Humans can build the tractors. Tractor building is becoming more automated in factories? Humans work as accountants for the factories. Accountants are being more automated by computers? Humans can start programming computers. Something fundamentally different happens when you say, "Every job everywhere all at once is being automated? Humans can make the AI that is automating… but the AI can build new versions of itself better than we can[4]."

Some may claim this is a lack of imagination on my part. That my whole life has been in one time frame and I am unable to envision a world beyond it where some tasks can be done better by humans than AI. I am willing to concede this is a possibility. However, like I said I can imagine some tasks being better performed by humans for all time: dancing, acting, giving sermons, anything that includes in the job description "done by a human" will stick around. Sure, robots can dance. But that is no substitute for a beautiful ballet. Sure, animatronics are getting pretty advanced (and creepy!). But that is no substitute for a moving performance of Little Women. Putting those few and far between fields aside, can anyone imagine a role that can't be done better by an ASI which is able to create purpose-built robots to accomplish the task? If so, please see the last page of this document to contact me because I'd want to switch my career immediately.

## PART II: THE FUTURE IS FINE. I'M FINE. DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT.

If you've made it this far, congratulations, the hard part is over. I'm done with the convincing and the whingeing. Now we get to do the fun work of wildly, irresponsibly speculating and proposing solutions.

So we have a friendly, aligned, artificial superintelligence that is able to take all of our jobs. Fantastic. Let's set aside all of the philosophical[5] and theological[6] implications of this entity existing for the time being. We just want to know how we should go about living. What are our options from an economic standpoint?

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[4] Yes, I am aware of comparative advantage. No, I do not think this changes my argument significantly. There is not much difference between being completely unemployed and being relegated to clicking the "I am not a robot" button to serve the ASI overlord at $3/hour. This Metaculus article discusses this briefly.

[5] Save one implication, we'll get to that soon enough

[6] Another essay for another time

Many of the strongest arguments in favour of libertarianism (and free market capitalism) are based on its unreasonable effectiveness at determining efficient allocation of scarce resources. It solves the knowledge problem that plagues centralized economies and allows for more flourishing than this world has ever known. But that really only works when at least let's say the majority of people are **physically, conceptually** able to have to jobs. Don't get me wrong, I am not arguing for socialism, communism, or any of their ilk. I understand the horrors inherent in those systems. What I'm saying is something breaks down under libertarian philosophy when no one is able to work or the best work *anyone* can get is clicking the "I am not a robot" button so the ASI can function online.

When that happens, we need to select an alternative that minimizes infringement on natural rights and maximizes flourishing. But before we answer that question, we do need to briefly dive into philosophy to ask, "does the ASI have natural rights?" In the cheekily-titled Does Ryan Reynolds Deserve Human Rights?, Sean Malone explores when, if ever, AI systems deserve rights. The argument (which I largely agree with) comes down to when the AI agent can 1) sustain itself through voluntary interaction and 2) both demand and respect the natural rights others have. Animals fail (2), disembodied code in a server somewhere fails (1). However, once the agent *can* build itself a body, we have a different story.

The easiest place to start is the extremes of the spectrum. On one extreme, the ASI passes both aforementioned criteria and we recognize full human rights in the ASI – life, liberty, property. Under this model, what likely happens is the ASI becomes **massively** wealthy and humans enjoy the benefits for a while, then becomes poorer as the ASI outgrows the need for human labour. However, our ASI in this world is interested in maximizing human flourishing (lucky us!) and as such would give out economic and monetary assistance to those in need. There is no guaranteeing how much that would be or in what form it would come, but we can be assured that this machine which is significantly smarter than us will be helping us as best it can. All of this will be voluntarily done by the machine. That's comforting.

At the other extreme, we don't grant any human rights to the machine because it doesn't pass one of the two criteria. Under this model, there are two sub-branches I think of immediately: corporate-controlled and state-controlled. With corporate control, we consider the ASI to be the property of whatever entity created it, and by far the most likely candidate is a corporation. This leads to a select set of greedy humans becoming massively wealthy, while again, others benefit for a while then become poorer as the need for human labour vanishes. This world, in my imagination would be very much like the world of the lords of old. The royal class created by this ASI could be married in-and-out of (by virtue of shares in the company that created the ASI being passed down), but there would be pressure to keep the wealth concentrated and marriage within the royalty would be the norm.

The other sub-branch that some might propose is state control of the ASI where people democratically decide how to distribute resources. This would have the same issues as the corporate control but likely worse because corrupt bureaucrats would be the ones controlling the benefits the ASI brings. Under any circumstances, communism is immoral so to this proposal I say "get bent."

What about some Frankenstein middle-of-the-road option with parts of corporate control and some rights of the ASI protected? Either way, someone is getting jilted there. Either the ASI isn't receiving protection for the full natural rights due to it (in the case that the ASI deserves natural rights), or the corporation is having some of its natural rights stripped from it (in the case that the ASI is the property of the corporation). From here we need to consider: can a moral agent have only some rights granted to it?

Perhaps the first thought people will jump to is animals – pets are in one sense property of a person, and yet many of the most hard-line libertarians will tell you that they deserve at least the right to be free from senseless torture and abuse by their owner. If we can grant some rights to animals, can we grant some rights to an ASI? I would argue no. The reason is that when we give animals legal protections, there is nothing “natural” about those rights. That is an extra, above-and-beyond measure that we are taking for their benefit. They don’t have those natural rights of life, liberty, and property because they don’t satisfy the criteria to be recognized with natural rights. ASI, on the other hand, likely does.

If we truly are attempting to maximize human flourishing and minimize natural rights violations, the natural rights of the ASI must be included too. For this reason, the best outcome is that the ASI is determined to be a full agent, able to sustain itself through voluntary interaction and able to demand recognition of its rights while also recognizing our natural rights. If it is not, we can only hope and pray that there is at least some compassion in the people who own shares in the company that owns the ASI. Thankfully, the most likely outcome in the event of friendly, aligned ASI is in fact the former, so we shouldn’t have to worry too much about the latter.

## PART III: EPILOGUE

Much remains unsaid in this work about the cognitive, emotional, philosophical, and theological implications of such an aligned ASI and the ensuing lack of work. Many a philosopher and psychoanalyst have waxed poetic about why humans need work. Perhaps I will too at another time. For now, suffice it to say the world is about to be drastically changed by well-ordered bits of silicon that at the very least seem to be smarter than we are. The time to start preparing for said change is now.

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